

AccessLetter

**Cambridge Commission for
Persons with Disabilities**

One housing trend that is expanding: Visitability

During its monthly meeting in November, the Commission for Persons with Disabilities approved a motion endorsing visitability, the practice of constructing homes so that people with mobility impairments can easily visit them. The motion also called on the Cambridge City Council to pass an ordinance requiring all new homes to be constructed with visitability features.



**Visitability features were built into Cornerstone Village
Cohousing Community in North Cambridge**

A visitable home includes two main features:

1. One of the entrances into the home should have no steps (could be a level or ramped entrance), and
2. Wider doorways (at least 32 inches, sufficient to allow a wheelchair user's passage) are provided throughout the home's main floor, including the bathroom.

Concrete Change, an Atlanta-based nonprofit, advocates an international campaign to make all homes visitable. In 1992, led by Concrete Change founder Eleanor Smith, that organization was successful in persuading Atlanta to be the nation's first city to pass a visitability ordinance. Since then, a number of U.S. localities, including Austin (TX), Urbana (IL), and Pima County (AZ), have adopted visitability laws. In 1998, the United Kingdom became the first country to adopt a nationwide housing visitability law.

(Visitability continued next page)

Area advocates quiz U.S. civil rights head on housing issues

On November 22, more than a dozen disability advocates from Cambridge, Boston and surrounding communities met with Assistant Attorney General Ralph E. Boyd, Jr. Mr. Boyd, who heads up the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), engaged with disability advocates in a lively exchange of views and ideas.

Chief among the topics was housing for people with disabilities. Mr. Boyd explained that, when he arrived in Washington a year and a half ago, "We were very aggressive in suing developers and architects who were not meeting their responsibilities for making housing units accessible." However, he heard complaints from advocates, as well as private developers and architects

across the country that DOJ and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was not being equally aggressive in enforcing disability access laws among public housing authorities.

Saying that when his department investigated this matter, Mr. Boyd found that "close to seventy percent of the public housing authorities across America are not meeting their Section 504 [of the Rehab Act of 1973] responsibilities to make five percent of their units accessible." For example, stated Mr. Boyd, "We looked at the D.C. housing authority right in our backyard who has literally tens of thousands of units and realized that they were nowhere near the five percent number."

Mr. Boyd continued, "It was a good vehicle for us to get together with the HUD people and decide what we would do with litigation" to require better compliance with accessibility laws, with positive

(Housing Advocacy continued next page)

Visitability (continued)

Local examples of visitable homes include the Cornerstone Village Cohousing Community in North Cambridge. The organizers of Cornerstone endeavored to create a community that would be not only accessible to people with disabilities, but also one that would be a model of visitability. When construction was completed in early 2002, all 32 units, a mix of townhouses and apartment flats, in Cornerstone Village were visitable.

One resident of Cornerstone, Judy Brewer, who has used a motorized scooter for 16 years, described the importance of visitability this way: "Most people don't realize how confining it can be to not be able to come and go freely in a community." Ms. Brewer continued, "Visitability is inherently such an easy and logical way to design residential space, that to choose not to build visitable housing -- in a world that already has so many unnecessary barriers -- is a travesty."

But living in a visitable community took some adjustment, according to Ms. Brewer: "During the first few months, I constantly found myself doing double-takes. Upon hearing an invitation to someone's house -- whether to a neighborhood meeting or a birthday celebration -- I'd reflexively start to ask 'Will I be able to get in?' while bracing myself for the expected answer of 'Oh! sorry, no, it's up steps' -- since this is what I'd experienced for years. But in this community, halfway through opening my mouth to ask about accessibility, I'd realize that I knew the answer: we had designed the whole community to be visitable, and of course I'd be able to get in! It gave me a sense of freedom, of barriers taken down that never should have been there in any case."

CCPD Chair Bet MacArthur expressed optimism that the City Council will take quick action to pass a visitability ordinance: "I think our prospects are good—it's hard to imagine there would be any objection. Actually, I'm surprised this concept

hasn't been passed as an ordinance in Cambridge a long time ago. This is a very simple step we can take to improve the everyday lives of people with disabilities and their families."

Housing Advocacy (continued)

results. "I'm happy to say that the HUD folks really did what we asked them to do, which was to set some real goals for some of the most problematic public housing authorities, and timetables for meeting these 504 [requirements]," said Mr. Boyd.

When asked by advocates, however, whether DOJ would be getting increased funding to combat disability discrimination in other areas, Mr. Boyd said that would be unlikely over the next two years. He cited the nation's lackluster economy and other budget priorities, including "terrorism-related security issues," as reasons why DOJ enforcement



U.S. Assistant Attorney General Ralph E. Boyd, Jr. shares a laugh with Mass. Office on Disability Director Myra Berloff

funding wouldn't be increased. After the next couple of years, Mr. Boyd indicated there would be better prospects for a boost in funding for civil rights enforcement.

Mr. Boyd praised disability advocates for their tenaciousness over the years, and for their willingness to engage in creative approaches to resolving patterns of discrimination.

Upcoming Events of Interest to the Disability Community

- Dec.4 **Noontime DEMONSTRATION at the State House to Protect Medicaid** – Come to a RALLY at 12 noon on the Grand Staircase (second floor) to protest budget cuts that are wiping out health care coverage for people with disabilities, seniors, children and anyone who is poor. Help send the message that enough is enough. Make calls on your legislators afterwards, then return to the Staircase for a meeting with Governor-elect Mitt Romney to hear how he will address the Medicaid crisis. If he (or a suitable designee) does not show up, there will be a **VIGIL** until midnight, perhaps outside (dress warmly). For more information contact Bill Henning at Boston Center for Independent Living (617-338-6665), Charlie Carr at Northeast Independent Living Program (978-687-4288) or Allison Staton at Health Care for All (617-275-2927).
- Dec.4 **Women Maximizing Abilities Now**, a peer support group for women with physical or emotional disabilities and/or chronic conditions meets at The Women's Center, 46 Pleasant St., Cambridge, 2 to 3:30 p.m. on the 1st and 3rd Wednesdays of each month. Wheelchair accessible; contact Mary Quinn at 617-354-8807 or <woman@braintrust.org> for more information.
- Dec. 4 **Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI) Drop-in group** (information & support) on first Wednesday of each month, 6 to 8 p.m. at Barnes & Noble Bookstore, 5th floor conference room, Kenmore Square in Boston. Call 617-247-6827 for information.
- Dec. 6 **Outdoor Explorations information session in downtown Boston** will tell how you and your organization can get involved, 8 a.m. Friday at Focus Pointe on the 11th floor, 18 Tremont Street. Outdoor Explorations (OE) programs are designed to bring together individuals with and without disabilities for shared adventures in the outdoors. OE makes the necessary accommodations so that all the participants can enjoy activities like rock climbing, kayaking, hiking, and rafting. Come learn how you, your colleagues, and family can experience the outdoors in a fun, accessible, and meaningful way. RSVP to Sarah Sommer at SSommer@outdoorexpl.org, call 781/395-4999 or check the web at <www.outdoorexplorations.org>.
- Dec. 7 **Gateway Arts 29th Annual HOLIDAY FAIR** -- from 10 am to 5 pm, 60-62 Harvard Street in Brookline, as part of the town's Holiday Crafts Tour. Come celebrate artists with disabilities, buy your holiday gifts and enjoy music and refreshments. Expanded hours for the Gateway Arts Store are Mon-Sat 11-6, Thurs 'til 8, and Sunday 12-5. Gateway store and studios are a project of Vinfen. More information is available at 617-734-1577 or <www.gatewayarts.org>.
- Dec. 10 **Boston Voice Users** is a group for people who use speech recognition or dictation software that meets the 2nd Tuesday of each month at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Building 2, Room 143. There is often a guest speaker. Meeting time is 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. Go to their website at <<http://harvee.billerica.ma.us/mailman/listinfo/boston-voice-users>> and click on Boston-voice-users Archives to find out more about meetings and discussions.
- Dec. 11 **Forum on Accessibility at Harvest Co-Op Markets** – this is an opportunity to meet with key staff of the Harvest Co-Op Markets to discuss ways to make their cooperative markets in Cambridge and Jamaica Plain more welcoming for customers with disabilities. Forums will take place from 2:00 to 3:30 p.m. and 6:00 to 7:30 p.m. at the Wainwright Bank community room, 647 Massachusetts Avenue in Central Square, Cambridge. For more information, contact Chris Durkin,

Member Services Coordinator, Harvest Co-Op Markets, 617-661-1580 x132 voice or <cdukin@harvestcoop.com>.

- Dec. 10-14 **Our Quest: Opportunity, Equality, Justice - 2002 National TASH Conference** at the Hynes Convention Center in Boston. TASH (acronym from its former name of The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps) is an international association of people with disabilities, their family members, other advocates, and professionals that work together for social and systems reform. Sessions include facilitated communication, inclusive education, student voices in transition planning, community building, and vocational opportunities. **Special pre-conference program include a 2-day symposium (Dec. 10-11) on *Understanding and Preventing Violence Against People with Disabilities*** by Tim Lynch, Dick Sobsey, Lorraine Wilgosh and Kate Scorgie (\$80 for person/family member with a disability). General registration fees vary from \$44 to \$374 depending on membership and event participation. For more information check the TASH website at <www.tash.org> or contact TASH at 1-800-482-8274 voice, 410-828-6706 fax.
- Dec. 12 **CCPD Monthly Meeting and HOLIDAY Gathering** – 51 Inman Street, 2nd floor conference room, 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. with opportunity for Public Comment. Bring a holiday delicacy to share (optional).
- Dec. 12 **Stroke Support Group** at the Cambridge Citywide Senior Center, 806 Massachusetts Ave. in Cambridge, 6-7:30 p.m. For more information contact Melissa Terrien at 800-922-8290, x343.
- Dec. 17 **Employment Law and People with Disabilities: The ADA and Beyond** will cover aspects of employment law that affect people with disabilities such as the Family & Medical Leave Act, sexual harassment law, employee performance, and terminations issues. It will also examine the responsibilities of employees in a business and review recent ADA rulings. This 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. workshop will be held in the Hogan Campus Center at Holy Cross College in Worcester. Fee: \$75. Registration DEADLINE is 3 weeks prior to the event. Contact Mandy Gehrig at 617-287-4337 voice, 617-287-4350 TTY, 617-287-4352 fax or email at <amanda.gehrig@umb.edu>.
- Dec. 17 **Disability Policy Consortium (DPC)** monthly meeting on 3rd Tuesday of month, 1 to 3 p.m. at the State House, Room A-1, Boston. For more information call Robert Snierison, Chair, <rsnierison@aol.com> or Mary Lou Maloney at 617-216-5181.
- Dec. 18 **Access Advisory Committee to the MBTA** meets from 1:00 to 3:30 p.m. at State Transportation Building, 10 Park Plaza, Boston, Conference Room 2. Call 617-973-7507 voice or 617-973-7089 TTY for more information or to request interpreters. For problems with The RIDE service, call 617-222-5123 voice, or 617-222-5415 TTY.
- Dec. 18 **Women Maximizing Abilities Now**, (see Dec. 4 listing for details.)
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